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ABSTRACT

Satire is a genre long extant if not especially beloved in human history. Practitioners of the art claim the intent to persuade and educate through their works. Many quantitative studies have tested the persuasive effects of satire. In research on persuasion, A.D. Annis (1939) compared the effects of editorials and editorial cartoons and concluded that straight editorials were more persuasive than satirical ones. C. R. Gruner's dissertation study (1965) showed that satire's humor may be enjoyed without being fully understood. In 1977, L. Powell found that straight messages were more effective than satire but that satire, in the long run, did more to prevent counter argumentation. All of these studies, while divergent in approach and aims, seem to suggest, at least, that satire can be persuasive. In the research on the understanding and appreciation of satire, Gruner (1978) found that the higher the student's SAT score, the greater the chance that he/she will understand a satirical piece. A series of studies by Gruner and others tested a wide variety of variables that could influence the understanding of satire but none of them concluded that clearly identifiable factors were affecting understanding. Experimentation using multi-factorial studies and more field and survey research might prove useful to understanding how satire works "in the real world." (Contains 46 references.) (TB)

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SATIRE AS PERSUASION

Paper Prepared for SCA Seminar on "Humor and Communication," October 28, 1992, Chicago
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Introduction. This paper comes in three parts. The first briefly considers evidence of why satire should be persuasive. The second reviews the quantitative studies actually testing for the persuasive effects of satire. The third part discusses the reasons for satire's failure to persuade, and what factors seem to affect the understanding of satire and, thus, its persuasive effectiveness. The conclusion suggests possible new avenues for research on satire as persuasion.

Should Satire Persuade? Satire has been a genre long extant if not especially beloved in human history. Most writers who create or discuss satire are literati. They seem to agree that the intent of satire, at least, is to persuade. For instance, Edgar Johnson (1945) wrote that "When burlesque inflates things . . . in order to deflate them, it is satire. [p. 18]" Further, he defines satire: "The one ingredient common to ... all... satire...is criticism [p. 37]." Certainly, criticism involves persuasive intent.

Gilbert Highet (1962) seems to echo Johnson: "The purpose of satire is, through laughter and invective, to cure folly and to punish evil . . .[p. 156]." Marie Collins Swabey (1961) agrees:

> Closely related to irony is another variety of the comic involving adverse criticism known as satire. To ridicule the vices and follies of mankind is the business of satire. . . satire by its imaginative eloquence excites anger at human misdeeds and cruelties [pp. 59-60].

Donald Bryant (1981) presents a fair summary of the classical argument that "satire is persuasion" from the standpoint of the rhetorical critic.

Modern practitioners of the art claim the intent to persuade through their work, too. The late editorial cartoonist, Edmund Duffy, whose cartoons have been described as "more effective than a well-aimed brick," has said that "the best cartoons are against something (Time, 1962)," and Walt Kelly, creator of "Pogo," has confessed: "Cartoonists are subversive. . . . they are against things (Riedel, 1962). Cartoonist Al Capp said of his creation, "Li'l Abner:"

> The main purpose of **Li'l Abner** is to make a living for me. The secondary and more celebrated purpose is to create suspicion of, and disrespect for, the perfection of all established institutions. That's what I think education is. Anybody who gets out of college having had his confidence in the perfection of existing institutions affirmed has not

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been educated. Just suffocated.

Some skepticism about the sacredness of all aspects of the Establishment is the priceless ingredient of education. Possibly those who read **Li'l Abner** will be discontent with the Establishment and make it a little better. And then, in another time, another Capp, hopefully a better one, but no less peevish, will come along and point out how suspect and full of flaws that improved Establishment is, and so on.

My job (and the job of all humorists) is to keep reminding people that they must not be content with anything [flyleaf].

Research on Satire as Persuasion. Annis (1939) compared the effects of editorials and editorial cartoons and concluded that "straight" editorials were more persuasive. However, Brinkman (1968) found that editorial cartoons, when presented with editorials, especially with the same points, aided persuasion.

Asher and Sargent (1941), in another early experiment, studied the effect of cartoon caricatures. They found that, in some instances, presentation of such caricatures exacted different emotional responses than did only the names of the concepts caricatured. Such results appear quite close to what we might call "persuasion."

Several studies have failed to find persuasion in the direction intended by the satirist. Cooper and Jahoda (1947) tried to reverse bigotry by exposing prejudiced, bigoted people to cartoons satirizing bigotry in the person of "Mr. Biggott." All the cartoons made fun of Mr. Biggott, a determined, narrow-minded racist/extremist/fanatic. The prejudiced people in this study were not affected (for reasons to be discussed later). Berlo and Kumata (1956) used a satirical radio program, "The Investigator," which made fun of Wisconsin's Senator Joseph McCarthy in particular and senate investigating committees in general. They found attitude changed somewhat in the predicted direction toward "senate investigating committees," but somewhat improved (though not statistically dependably) attitude toward McCarthy. Again, these results are explained later in this paper.

For his doctoral dissertation, Gruner (1965) used a speech ("A Demure Proposal") satirizing the idea of "censorship" by pointing out that, if we censor anything, we must censor the violent, sex-ridden nursery rhymes which our children are taught at their mothers' knees. Attitudes toward censorship were not changed in this study, as they also were not in a replication study (Gruner, 1966). And, in a replication on a high school audience in Nebraska, the anti-censorship speech again failed to influence attitude toward censorship (Zeman, 1967). Another study used part of the anti-censorship satire inserted into an otherwise straightforward persuasive speech against censorship (Pokorny and Gruner,

1965). Both speeches produced some persuasion, but the satire-added speech did not surpass the "straight" persuasive speech in this regard.

It needs to be said here that all the studies mentioned in the paragraph above used the Gruner "Demure Proposal" speech, or parts of it. And one serious problem with that speech is that few people, probably, understood the serious point the satirist was trying to make in the speech (Gruner, 1965).

If respondents do not perceive the satirist's intent, they probably would remain immune to persuasion; that is, accepting in whole or in part the message's thesis would be quite difficult if not even perceived, whether the argument were satirical or "straightforward" (Fine, 1957; Thistlewaite, deHaan, & Kamenetsky, 1955). Consider: if one does not understand the content of, say, a joke, one can hardly appreciate it. If one is told, "Know what a blonde says when you blow in her ear? She says, 'Thanks for the refill,'" the joke is not funny if the receiver does not know the "dumb blonde" stereotype. In fact, this "knowledge of content" is what makes "ethnic humor" so widespread and common; each member of a culture carries around a stereotypical image of the Pollack, the Irishman, the Scot, the "canny Jew," the militaristic German, etc. (Davies, 1991, p. 320) These stereotypes provide a built-in stock of common knowledge immediately brought into play with the joke's introduction: "Two Pollacks were drinking in a bar. . . ." Knowing the stereotype of what a "Pollack" is supposed to represent, one needn't say, "There were these two incredibly (stupid, unsophisticated, unclean, etc.) guys drinking in a bar . . ."

Satire, now, can be enjoyed as "humor" because of its technique, apparently, but still fail to communicate its serious point. In Gruner's dissertation study (1965) his "Demure Proposal" drew "general laughter" in eleven places, and scattered laughter in numerous other spots. Likewise, respondents tended to rate the speech as humorous; however, only 12 of the 129 experimental subjects checked the correct thesis of the speech out of five possible statements of purpose. In another study, Wang (196-?) compared "Western style satire" (Art Buchwald) with Chinese style satire (Ho-fan) for persuasiveness. Neither satirist produced persuasion, but, again, the majority of respondents failed to understand the satirical theses. Little wonder, then, that Carl (1968) found that few people understood the point behind editorial cartoons.

Receiver knowledge of satiric thesis was manipulated in the next study (Gruner, 1967). Students read two Art Buchwald satires (on "U. S. Policy Toward Red China" and "Labor Unions") and rated them on "funniness" and "literary quality." Then they responded to attitude scales on the thesis argued in each satire. Experimental subjects were told the specific thesis intended by the writer in each case. Control subjects were NOT so told, but 7were asked to

write, in their own words, the thesis of each.

As hypothesized, those told the satiric theses shifted in average attitude in the direction urged by each thesis; the shifts were small but significant. The control subjects did not shift in average attitude score; and their written answers revealed that a large majority did NOT understand the satires' theses. It was concluded that knowing the thesis of the satires was a factor in producing the persuasion. In another study (Gruner, 1987) respondents were either told or NOT told in advance the thesis of Hoppe's "SANE" piece before reading and responding to it. Those told in advance the thesis were more likely to end up agreeing with Hoppe's thesis, and, of those NOT told in advance, those who accurately perceived the thesis were more likely than those not perceiving it to also agree with Hoppe's thesis. In a later study (Gruner, 1988a) respondents, while not tested for persuasive effects, were tested for attitude toward two topics and then read two satires (Buchwald) on those topic; they then checked which of five statements after each was the thesis intended by the satirist. Those previously holding the attitude exemplified in the satires more correctly identified the satirist's theses.

Since much contemporary satire is directed at individual persons, rather than concepts such as "the U. S. policy toward Red China," or "Labor Unions," one study (Gruner, 1971a) used two Buchwald satires ridiculing then-president Richard Nixon. Some Ss. read one anti-Nixon satire and two "control" pieces, another read two anti-Nixon pieces and one control, and another group read only 3 "control" pieces. The evidence indicated that only one of the two anti-Nixon satires was understood (and, thus, produced some persuasion----reduction in ratings of Nixon's "character") and the other anti-Nixon satire was not clearly understood.

A later study by Gruner (1971b) used an Art Hoppe satire making fun of Martha Mitchell, wife of then-Attorney General John Mitchell. Knowledge of Martha Mitchell's compulsive use of the telephone (the topic of the satire) was manipulated by information from Time magazine. The satire proved to be persuasive in altering the "image" of Mrs. Mitchell, but the knowledge manipulation factor did not "work" as hypothesized. This was explained by the fact that Martha was already well-known to the subjects and information from Time merely served as a prestigious source to "anchor" attitude toward her.[1]

Mary Ann McGown (1968) tested whether a satire by Art Hoppe deriding capital punishment as a deterrent to murder ("SANE Capital

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[1]Details, including (wherever possible) the actual humorous stimuli used, of these studies and other done before about 1977, appear in Charles R. Gruner, Understanding Laughter: The Workings of Wit and Humor (Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1978).

Punishment") would be as persuasive as the same argument dressed in non-satiric style. Neither message seems to have produced persuasion, but the study gave impetus to another. Gruner (1972a) partially replicated that study and found, again, that the satiric "SANE" was rated as more humorous than its non-satiric counterpart; but more importantly, discovered that most Ss had missed the point of "SANE." After reading it, Ss were asked to check which of 5 statements was the author's thesis; only 17 of 56 correctly checked "Capital punishment is <u>not</u> a deterrent to murder." This was the first of a number of studies in which only about one quarter of college students exposed to "SANE" would correctly check from a list of five statements the thesis intended by Mr. Hoppe.

Cooper and Jahoda (1947). mentioned previously, found that ridicule could not dent strong, previously held prejudice. Two other studies of humor (Priest, 1966; Priest and Abrahams, 1970) have found that humor consonant with one's political preference is enjoyed more than humor dissonant to it. So, during the Presidentical election of 1972 between Nixon and George McGovern, a study (Gruner, 1972b) was conducted using Buchhwald editorials satirizing each candidate. Students stated in writing whom they would vote for if the election were held that day and then read the editorials and checked which of five statements following each was the thesis intended by the author. The results supported the hypothesis that Nixonites would better understand the anti-McGovern pieces than the anti-Nixon pieces, and vice-
versa; satire "reinforces" previous attitudes.

Markeiewicz (1972) did a series of 7 experiments for her dissertation, some employing satire, some using humor, as compared with "straight" messages. The sum total of her findings are somewhat ambivalent, but provide some evidence of the persuasive nature of satire.

Powell (1975) was interested in the effect of satiric persuasion when ego-involvement with the issue was manipulated. He found that Ss of low ego-involvement were persuaded by satire, but that the persuasion did not hold up under counter-persuasion. On the other hand, Ss of high ego-involvement might be effectively "immunized" against later counter-argument by satiric argument.

To test this latter supposition Powell (1977) used a more sophisticated experimental design. He found, again, that a "straight" persuasive message can be more effective than a satiric one, initially, but that a satiric message seemed to better immunize against later counter argumentation. Another finding was the surprise that Ss who held the satirized topic as highly salient experienced a "boomerang effect." They moved in the direction <u>opposite</u> that advocated in the satire. This "boomerang" effect may have been the force operating to produce the findings of two studies of the TV show "All In the Family."
Surlin (1975) found that bigots generally tended to believe that

"Archie" (the "loveable bigot" of the series) was right to hold the beliefs he espoused, and generally "won" the arguments with liberal "Meat-head." Vidmar and Rokeach (1974) came to very much the same conclusion, summarizing that "On balance the study seems to support more the critics who have argued that 'All in the Family' has harmful effects."

In a study to test the possible theoretical bases of satire's effectiveness as an immunizer against later counter argument, Powell (1978) insightfully used scale ratings of satirical and "straight" persuasive speeches followed by ratings of counter-argument. He concluded:

> . . . a speaker who chooses a satirical approach to a subject over a direct approach is more likely to receive higher ratings on speaker adjustment, subject, and analysis, and lower ratings on organization. These four traits appear to be the main ones that audiences use to differentiate between satirical and direct speeches. Further, the use of a satirical pretreatment, rather than a direct pretreatment, can influence responses to counter-arguments in terms of voice, analysis, material, and subject. These results indicate that the inoculation effectiveness of a satirical pretreatment may be due to (1) the ability of the satirical message to motivate the respondent to construct defensive arguments, and (2) the ability of the satirical speech to generate negative response to the non-entertaining presentation of the direct counterargument.

A later study by Powell (1978) investigated respondent topic salience and its influence on perceived source credibility. His abstract follows:

> This study examined the impact of a satirical message on audience response to the message source in terms of varying levels of topic salience and prior attitude valence. The two areas of audience responses investigated were source credibility and perception of the source's attitude. The results indicated that (1) the use of satire reduced the likelihood that the speaker would be perceived as having a strong attitude on the topic, (b) satire positively affected source credibility ratings on the sociability and extroversion dimensions, and (c) satire interacted with topic salience and prior attitude to affect composure and character-competence evaluations.

Although Powell erroneously claimed several times in his reports that satire has not been found to produce persuasion, his leaving academe became an unfortunate vacancy in the scholarly investigation of satire as persuasion.

Summarizing these studies is not easy. They differ in intent and methodology as well as results. However, it does seem sensible to conclude that satire can be persuasive, but only if respondents

understand the serious thesis intended by the satirist. Also, satire is often not understood by college students, at least. We now turn to efforts to determine WHY satire is often not understood.

Research on Understanding/Appreciation of Satire. As noted above, one can appreciate satire as humor (based upon style and partial knowledge of the material's content) but still not understand the serious, satiric thesis of the author. For instance, one might find amusement in learning that an educated, mature man would coach a grade schooler to mis-spell "potato" by adding an "e" at the end without any serious thought as to who that man is. But to know that the "potatoe man" is Vice President of the U. S., a partly-literate man within a single heartbeat of the Presidency," and to have this information used to cast doubt on his leadership abilities, etc., is to understand the satiric nature of the "joke."

So, obviously, factual knowledge of the satirical situation is important to understanding the point of a satire. And the studies, above, also show that, when applicable, political alliance can affect satire understanding. What else?

In the "bigotry" studies (Cooper and Jahoda, 1947) the close-mindedness of the prejudiced people in the study might have been the factor interfering with their understanding the anti-prejudice message of the "Mr. Biggott" cartoons. And Miller and Bacon (1971) had found that the higher the score on the Rokeach short-form dogmatism scale, the longer it took students to "get" the point of a risque cartoon. These studies gave impetus to a study by Gruner (1974). He administered the short-form Rokeach scale to students and then had them try to identify the authors' intended theses of three satirical editorials. He found a linear relationship between lowered score and ability to identify such theses.

Reasoning that intelligence as well as knowledge might be a factor in understanding satire, Gruner (1978) used the same methodology of the study just above, replacing Rokeach scores with student entrance scores on the SAT verbal scale. The hypothesis was confirmed: as average SAT verbal score went up, so did the number of satires' theses correctly identified. The results of both these studies are summarized in a more convenient source (Gruner, 1979).

It might be enough to know that failure to understand satirical theses could be caused by any factor such as ignorance, narrow-mindedness, stupidity, and/or political prejudice (or any combination thereof). Nevertheless, a series of studies have sought to discover other psychological variables that might affect the understanding of satire. Each study asked respondents to provide certain data, then read three editorial satires, and then

check after each which of five statements was the thesis intended by the satirist.

This series of studies (Gruner, 1987, 1988, 1989, 1990, 1992; Gruner, Gruner & Travillion, 1991; Gruner & Harris, 1992; Shirley & Gruner, 1989) tested a wide variety of variables as possibly influencing satire understanding. These variables included: "humor style," first-born/only-child status, socio-economic level, birthplace (area of country), GPA, argumentiveness, prior attitude toward satirized topic, age, use/non-use of alcohol, parent sense of humor, religiosity, sex, year in college, fanship of various cartoons/comic strips (such as "Far Side," "Doonesbury," etc.), newspaper readership, hours of TV-watching, cynicism (both "self-rated" and measured), preferred type of humor, Greek organizational membership, family income, parents divorced/not divorced, etc.

These studies have generally found no evidence that any of these factors influenced satire understanding. One study found that "religiosity" seemed to heighten incidence of satire thesis understanding (Gruner, 1988), but no theoretical base explains this possible statistical fluke, and it awaits replication. One other factor, Greek organization membership, was also found (Gruner, 1989) but is in the same category as "religiosity." Two other factors, sex and fanship of "The Far Side," were found to possibly influence satire understanding (Gruner, Gruner, & Travillion, 1991), but these failed to hold up upon replication (Gruner & Harris, 1992; Gruner, 1992).

In this series of studies, two other sets of data were secured each time. Respondents, after reading each satire and checking which of five statements was the thesis, also rated each satire on a 7-step semantic differential-type scale on "interest-ingness" and a six-step scale on "funniness." For each set of ratings a correlation matrix (Pearson *r*'s) was computed. The interestingness and funniness ratings always correlated positively within and among the three satires. In other words, the interestingness of one satire would correlate positively with the interestingness and the funniness of another satire, as well as correlating positively with the funniness of the same satire. These correlations ranged from around .25 to around .75. The conclusion from these data seems to be that college students appear to have a general "appreciation-of-satire" psychological characteristic.

Future Research. First, the variables of "religiosity" and "membership in a Greek fraternal organization" as factors affecting satire understanding need further testing; neither has been replicated.

Otherwise, experimentation of satirical persuasion will have to be carried out using more sophisticated multi-factorial studies taking into account the main effects of (and interactions between/among) factors known to affect satire understanding:

content of the satire, verbal intelligence, dogmatism and, where applicable, political affiliation. Other factors to consider are attitude valence and ego-involvement. The variable of "fairness" (satire is often considered "unfair") needs further investigation, since it has received little attention. Gruner (1971b) did find that a satire of Martha Mitchell seems to have influenced respondents' "image" of her, even though they also considered the satire "unfair."

In straightforward persuasion we generally tend to believe that knowledge of the topic's content, understanding of the source's thesis, intelligence, prejudices (to a lesser degree) and political afffiliation can be "adapted to" (at least, that's what our public speaking textbooks teach). But satire is such a set form that adaptation to specific audiences and their indio-syncrocies is not so easy.

The effect of satiric persuasion might only show up weeks or months after exposure. Long-term effects of persuasion studies, lacking in general, are especially sparse for satire. It might be that the ELM (Elaboration Likelihood Model) might be effect-ively utilized, since it takes into account "lazy" targets and the peripheral nature of satire's cues.

Aside from experimentation, more field and survey research might prove useful to understanding how satire works "in the real world." What kind of people diligently read "Doonesbury," Art Buchwald, and Art Hoppe? Who are the people who diligently track down the non-regular appearance on public television of Mark Russell specials? How do these fans of satire use the material which they avidly seek? Do they repeat it to other? Do they find it supportive of the previous beliefs?

It would appear that, for anyone interested, the field of satire as persuasion has a great deal of room for anyone wishing to move in and take part.

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